

The Image of God

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Date: 21 June 2009

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[0 : 00] Well, as I said this morning, it's a great joy to be with you again at the Tron in your new clothes, and I have for you tonight a great text and a great theme.

I would almost like to burst into song, but I don't have your minister's gifts in that, so you'll have to put up with ordinary speech. John chapter 14, and I'm going to preach from a sentence in verse 9, but I'm not telling you yet what it is.

John chapter 14 and verse 9. I'm using the NIV. It's very little different from your ESV. I'm too old to change, really, so there you are.

John 14, 9. And Jesus answered, Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

How can you say, show us the Father? Stanley Baldwin was, as some of you may remember from pre-war history, the Prime Minister before World War II.

[1 : 14] He was very greatly criticized, and has been by recent historians, because they blame him for the fact that we were so unready for the war in 1939.

The picture of Stanley Baldwin was of a calm man with a pipe in his mouth, large paunch, looked like a retired farmer. And he was the Prime Minister.

And if he was the Prime Minister, nothing could go wrong. And then, of course, Hitler cut across the story. And he may, I don't know. I have no judgment on these matters.

I don't know enough about it. But he may have cost us dear as a country by not getting us ready. As a result of all this criticism, he had two sons.

One was a university professor, who in the 1950s wrote a book by way of defense of his father and explanation. He wanted, as he saw it, to put the record straight.

[2 : 15] And the title he gave to his book is the only thing that I want to mention tonight. The title was this, My Father, the True Story. My Father, the True Story.

I'd very much like to write a book with that title. I don't have the strength nor the ability, but I'd love to write a book about the teaching of Jesus on the Father.

It's one of the richest themes, I think, in the four Gospels, not least in the Gospel of John. So if there's a budding author and theologian combined in the congregation this evening, I bequeath that title and theme to you.

And I hope you will write a book on my father, the true story. Now, here in chapter 14, and in the upper room discourse, which is in chapter 14, 15, and 16, as you know, there are many glimpses of the wonderful, many glimpses of the Father.

There's the Father's house in the beginning of the chapter, the Father's gift that we thought of this morning, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Father's glory, and many other glimpses of the Father, given to us uniquely through the teaching of Christ.

[3 : 28] I have chosen just one this evening, and that is the Father's image. The Father's image. And my text, therefore, is tucked into the middle of verse 9.

It's that marvelous sentence. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. In other words, Jesus is claiming there to be the perfect image and representation of the Heavenly Father.

That's surely one of the most breathtaking things that Jesus ever said. No mere man could say it, of course, without blasphemy.

Now, we owe this marvelous statement here, in the middle of verse 9, of course, to the questions of the disciples, Thomas and Philip.

The commentators are rather hard on them, I think, as though they're rather slow-witted. And for all I know, they may have been very puzzled. It was a bewildering time for them. They had just been told that their Master is going to leave them.

[4 : 31] It's inconceivable that they can continue without him. And there are so many questions that need to be answered. And so, it looks as though the questions are coming thick and fast, doesn't it, at the beginning of chapter 14.

We must know this. We must know that if you're going to leave us. And in verse 8, Philip says, Lord, at least show us the Father. That will be sufficient.

At least if we know that, then we shall have some understanding before you leave us. That's all we need. Share us the Father, and we'll be satisfied. Now, let's step back just for a moment.

You will know that all through the Bible history, and I want you to have your Bibles at the ready this evening, all through Bible history, the request to gain a vision of God is refused.

The most, the one that's really my favorite, and I suppose everybody's favorite for that matter, is that wonderful story in Exodus 33.

[5 : 34] And you remember that Moses said to God in chapter 33, verse 18, Now show me your glory.

Well, Moses knew God face to face. If there was anybody who could ask for that, it was Moses. And the Lord says, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, and I will have mercy, and so on, but no one may see me and live, at the end of verse 20.

And so God did come down and pass before Moses, but it's always so interesting, isn't it? There was no vision, only a voice. That's how God reveals himself. Many people want to see.

Many people want a vision, a beatific vision, but God reveals himself, as always, by a voice. He passed in front of Moses, verse 6, proclaiming, and you get one of these marvelous revelations of God in words, which is repeated, I think I'm right in saying, eight times in the Old Testament.

The Lord, the Lord, compassionate and gracious, and so on. So Moses asked for that. But God reveals himself by a word, but no vision.

[6 : 48] No one can see me and live. In the Gospels, it's exactly the same. That wonderful statement in chapter 1, verse 18.

I love the way that John slams the door on your fingers, rather, at the beginning of verse 18. No one has ever seen God. Right, let's get that clear. But, God, the one and only, of course, that is Jesus, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

I like the dogmatism, the definite statement. No one has ever seen God. Let that be clear to us. And he repeats that in his first epistle, chapter 4, verse 12. Last week we were studying with the young ministers, the pastoral epistles, the letters to Timothy in particular.

And if you have a Bible, you may like to turn there to the doxologies, which are rather a special part of these letters of Paul to Timothy. Now, I'll read them.

Don't bother to turn if you'd rather simply listen. They're very Old Testament, really, in tone. And the first is in chapter 1, verse 17 of 1 Timothy.

[7 : 57] 1 Timothy 1, 17. Now to the King Eternal, Immortal, Invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. And as we turn over, chapter 6, verse 15.

Another splendid doxology, very much an Old Testament devotional statement. Verse 15, which God will bring about in his own time. God, the blessed and only ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.

And we sing, what a relief the hymns have been tonight. What lovely hymns you have. I sometimes preach in churches where I could scream because of some of the tunes that I can't sing and nobody else can sing either.

But it's been lovely today to have some great hymns. And we sing this invisibility of God, don't we? Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light, unapproachable, hid from our eyes.

However, that's not good enough for the human race, is it? We're a conceited bunch. And they were told we can't see God. We feel we must do our best to try to imagine what the gods or God is like.

[9 : 23] And that, of course, is the source of all the ethnic religions in the world today. Their imagination of God, their attempt to understand and put into their own words how they see God, their imaginations produce, of course, an image.

Imagination and image are the same. Images of what we imagine God to be like. And it's not only the pagan and the heathen, is it?

Quite often I find people will say to me, well, I like to think of God as such and such. And I guess we hear that kind of thing from time to time. And that's to produce an image, an idol, how I see God.

And you remember that Paul at Athens labeled all these images as ignorance. Acts chapter 17, verse 29. I'm fond of this ending of the sermon because in most sermons the preacher tells you what you ought to do or not to do.

I don't know any other sermon which ends by telling you what to think or not to think. We ought to preach more like that, I think. Verse 29 comes to the end of this great sermon in front of the celebrities in Athens.

[10:40] Although the great days of philosophy were over in Athens, it was still the center of intellects and thinkers who met together. And this is what the Apostle Paul said to them.

Verse 29. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill.

In the past, God overlooked such ignorance. Well, that's plain speaking, isn't it? It's quite interesting, I think, that he doesn't deny that there are images, and apparently if you pass through the street of Athens in those days, you are more likely to meet an idol or an image than you are a human being.

So the place was clogged up with shrines and idols. But he doesn't deny the design being beautiful in some cases, the skill of the image maker, the costly materials you see there in verse 29, gold and silver.

He doesn't deny that. They put their very best, haven't they, into their images. They've put their imagination with skill and design for the people, and what does Paul say?

[11:52] Ignorance. Now, as you know, Israel was forbidden to attempt any imagination of God. That's why you have that magnificent second commandment, which you ought to know by heart, but if I don't, I have to look it up.

You shall not make for yourself an idol or image in the form of anything in heaven above or earth beneath. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

The great second commandment, you shall not make an image. You shall not imagine. You shall not say, oh, I like to think of God like that. I saw in a Bible encyclopedia some time ago that no image of God has ever been found by the archaeologists in ancient Israelite territory.

I think that's a fascinating fact. I don't know if it's still true. Whereas on heathen sites, when the archaeologists dig, there are idols by the hundred.

No image is allowed. No image is found. And so the situation remained in the Bible until God was incarnate in Jesus Christ.

[13:03] And now at last we have an image. And so when Philip says, show us the Father, he gets this absolutely stunning answer. It looks as though the Lord feels he ought to have known it already.

How can you say, show us the Father? And then these wonderful words, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. In the words of Hebrews chapter 1 and verse 3, the Son is the radiance of the Father's glory, the exact representation of his being.

The late Professor Tom Torrance, many of you will know something of that remarkable man, when he was young, was a kind of assistant padre with the Scottish regiments in Italy in 1944.

They were attacking a ridge, which is extremely difficult to take. And one evening, the assault was made at night under the illumination of searchlights.

And the late Professor Torrance, as a youngster, was in uniform as a stretcher bearer. These are words that come from an unpublished memoir of his that he left.

[14:31] When daylight filtered through, I came across a young soldier, scarcely 20 years old, lying mortally wounded on the ground, who clearly had not long to live.

As I knelt down and bent over him, he said, Padre, is God really like Jesus? I assured him that he was the only God that there is, the God who has come to us in Jesus, shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Saviour.

As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away. Torrance never forgot that incident, and he leaves this also in his unpublished memoir.

That incident left an indelible impression on me. I kept wondering afterwards what modern theology in the churches had done to drive some kind of wedge between God and Jesus, and reflected on the damage done by this to the proclamation of the Gospel.

There is no hidden God, no God behind the back of the Lord Jesus, but only the one Lord God who became incarnate in him.

[15 : 44] Years later, in my Aberdeen parish, an old lady, who had not longed to live, said to me one day, Dr. Torrance, is God really like Jesus? I was startled, for those are the very same words I'd heard on that battlefield in Italy.

Isn't that a terrific question? And a terrific answer, of course. Padre, is God really like Jesus? And the answer?

Yes. He who has seen me has seen the Father. But you may say to me, well, Thomas and Philip, of course, they had an advantage on us.

They could see Jesus, but we can't, for he's returned to the Father in glory. So what are we to do? Well, we must read on, mustn't we, verse 10.

And this will show us what we have to do. You know, we're not in Thomas' position, we're not in Philip's position. But don't you believe that I am in the Father, verse 10 of chapter 14 of John, and that the Father is in me?

[16 : 51] Now, listen to this. The words I say to you are not just my own. That's remarkable, isn't it? Here is the one who is the greatest teacher the world has ever seen, ever heard, and he says, these are not my words.

The words I say to you are not just my own, rather it is the Father living in me who is doing his work. So the sentence goes rather different to what you'd expect.

You'd expect him to say, the words that I speak to you are the Father's words, who is saying these words to me. But no, the Father living in me is doing his work.

That's very Hebrew, very Jewish, very Hebrew. In Hebrew, word and work are the same. So that the words of Jesus are his work.

They're powerful. They bring new people into existence. They change our hearts. Similarly, the works of Jesus tell us something. They reveal God to us.

[17 : 53] By them we understand what God is and is saying. So word and work are the same with him. They're perfectly consistent. They interpret one another. I think that's a wonderful insight into the ministry of Jesus.

When I hear him, I know it's a powerful word. It'll change people. It'll change me. When I listen to that work of his, that miracle, I hear what he has to say.

It's so plain. So the word and the work are inseparable. The words have power. The works have meaning. And as I say, they interpret one another.

So by his words, which are not his, but the Father's, and by his works, the miracles, which are done by the Father through him, Jesus is the perfect image of the Father.

Listen to the simple words of Colossians chapter 1 and verse 15. He is the image of the invisible God.

[18 : 59] That is all we can know about God, all that we need to know about Almighty God, I have no Father. We see and know and hear in Jesus Christ. So what?

So what are the implications of this for us today? Well, I've set down a few. You may like to think these out. You may like to tell me afterwards how you see the implications of this. Because obviously, they're tremendous.

If God the Father is revealed to us in Jesus Christ perfectly, if as we look and listen to Jesus, we are looking at God and listening to God, the implications for today are great.

First, and this is not the most important, it just happens to be the first I put down in my notes, debates about the existence of God will get us nowhere.

Not that I'm ungrateful. I was in Oxford listening to Professor Dawkins, the atheist, and John Lennox, the Christian apologist. John is a magnificent apologist for Christianity and he certainly gave as much as he got and in fact, I think he removed many barriers, really, in Richard Dawkins' mind and made him think.

[20 : 19] So I'm grateful for that and I'm glad that John Lennox continues to debate with Richard Dawkins from time to time. But you see, in the end, neither side can win. Neither side can convince the other.

You can't prove the existence of God. You can't disprove the existence of God. It's a stalemate. If God is invisible, then there is nothing for scientific investigation to get hold of.

You can't measure him. You can't investigate him. So science has got nothing to say. The God Delusion, that is Richard Dawkins' book, is a pointless book because there's no debate.

I wish he'd written a book called *The Jesus Delusion*. Then you can get your teeth into it. Then there's something to debate. Is Jesus deluded? What are we to make of him? We have evidence in front of us.

There's something you can talk about. But simply to talk about the existence of God, well, you go round and round in a circle. So I want to say to some of you, perhaps so younger, maybe students, finished at university, don't waste your breath in discussing with your friend these abstract concepts about God because you will not persuade anybody and they will not persuade you.

[21 : 38] Keep the debate about Jesus. That's the first rule in Christian apologetics because there we have facts, there we can look at it, there we can make a judgment. What do you think?

You must say something. You must have a view. You can't disprove that he lived and said and died and rose again. So the first thing to say is let's talk about the real things.

Let's not debate things which go round and round in a circle. Those debates, though as I say, I admire John Lennox, I'm thankful for the effort he puts in, I'm thankful that he shapes up to Dawkins and shakes him, but nevertheless you get nowhere on those evenings at all.

Everybody comes out convinced as they went in. Second implication, the importance of *Christianity Explored*.

I'm so glad that this church is committed to that course. It's so important and it is being so fruitful. And why is *Christianity Explored* so much better than many efforts we've made in the past?

[22 : 44] I think it's because it's based around a gospel, the gospel of Mark. So that when people take that course and begin to investigate, begin to study, they hear the words of Jesus, they listen to the works of Jesus, they see them there on the page.

It's all there for them to hear and see. Craig Dyer was here with us this week with the Young Ministers and he is, I think you know now, is helping Rico Tice and going to very many different places in the world to show people how to lead this course.

It's fairly basic, but many people need training into leading it. But I'm an enthusiast for that course because it takes you straight to the facts, straight to the person, straight to the words, straight to the works.

He has seen me, has seen the Father. Third implication, agnosticism is now impossible.

We can no longer sit on the fence and say, well, I don't know. I remind myself today of a very cocksure city man who came up to me at some reception in the city when I was still rector of St. Helens and tell me with great, well, he first of all started to flatter me and say he was so glad that the church was there in the city and that I was doing what I was doing.

[24 : 11] But of course, he said, I have to tell you that I'm an agnostic. Well, it was quite a friendly conversation. I wasn't rude to him, I assure you, but I did point out to him that the root of the word agnostic is exactly the same root as the word ignoramus.

And that that possibly might describe him better than he thought hitherto. As I say, I wasn't rude. We did this with a smile and he went away with a laugh. I think he went away rather more quickly than he might have done before.

But it's true, isn't it? An agnostic is simply saying, I don't know. And to say, I don't know about Jesus is to say I'm ignorant or an ignoramus.

He was a hopeless case, of course, that man that I met and there are many men like that. And the reason he was a hopeless case is told us in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 4, if you have your Bible still with you, it's a very important verse when we come up against men like that and we talk to them and argue with them and we're able to show them the truth about Jesus and yet, we get nowhere with them.

And the reason it's given us in this extraordinary verse, 2 Corinthians 4, and verse 4. The God of this age, that's Satan, the enemy, the devil, the devil has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ, sorry, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

[25 : 49] I read that barely. I'll read it again. The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

They can't see the light. So we come into a dark room, we turn the lights on, but someone who is sitting in that room who is blind still is helpless. The light may have come into the darkness, but there's no way the blind person can see.

So the word has been made flesh. Jesus is the light of the world, but the devil is blinding men. I'm sure you had that experience of doing your very best to explain these things, to persuade someone, and you find you're getting absolutely nowhere.

You felt you'd answered their questions, and haven't you had that experience of in your heart just praying to God and saying, God, unless you will do something, there's no way this person is ever going to make a step forward.

I can't open his eyes. I can't get anywhere with him. He's blind. Will you open his eyes to see that light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God?

[27 : 10] So thirdly then, agnosticism is now impossible. It's the coward's way out. Fourthly, well, very simply, I think, trust him.

These amazing words back then to John 14. You see, it's full of Christ, this chapter, isn't it? Verse 2, believe in God, believe in me. You trust God, trust me. Verse 6, I am the way, truth and life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Come to me. Verse 14, you may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it.

Trust me. Come to me. Ask me. Verse 15, if you love me, you will obey what I command. Love me. Verse 23, Jesus replied, if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.

Obey me. That's the rule of the road for Christians. That's the rule of the road for next week. You will glorify your Father in heaven if you trust him, if you come to him, if you ask him, you love him, and you obey him.

[28 : 23] Because in trusting him, in coming to him, in asking him, in loving him, and obeying him, you're trusting the Father, you're coming to the Father, you're asking the Father, and loving the Father, and obeying the Father.

He that sees me has seen the Father. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. We humble ourselves before you, Almighty God. We thank you for the revelation you have given to us in the Word made flesh.

We thank you that Jesus is the perfect representation, representation of your glory, the radiance of your person. Amen. and we thank you that because we know him, we know you.

Because we love him, we love you. Because we seek to obey him, we seek to obey you. And so, Heavenly Father, we pray that in this church and through the witness of everyone in this church tonight, the light of the glory of the gospel may be made known in the darkness of this city and the darkness of this world.

[29 : 44] And that through that light many may find their eyes open so that they can say, once I was blind, now I see. Have mercy upon us, we pray. Have mercy upon our nation. Have mercy upon our church and have mercy upon us.

and accept our worship and thanks tonight through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.